

**AMENDED
SCOPING DECISION DOCUMENT**

US HIGHWAY 14 – MAJOR CONSTRUCTION

MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

State Project Number: S.P. 5200-03
Trunk Highway Number: TH 14

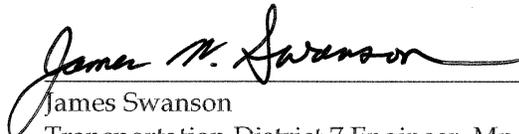
This project proposes to improve approximately 22.5 miles of US Highway 14 from Front Street in New Ulm, to County Road 6 near North Mankato. The proposed project includes:
(1) expansion of the existing two-lane highway to a four-lane divided expressway with interchanges or at-grade stop-controlled intersections on existing and/or new alignment; and
(2) capacity improvements to the existing Minnesota River Crossing in New Ulm, at the west end of the corridor. The study area is located primarily in Nicollet County with portions in Brown County.

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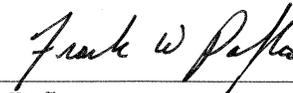
APPROVED BY:

Sept. 30 2005
Date


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US 14 Amended Scoping Decision Document

I. Report Purpose

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) will prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for this project. The first step in the EIS process is “scoping,” the purpose of which is to focus the EIS on a small number of potentially feasible build alternatives and to determine which environmental impact categories will be examined and at what level of detail they will be studied. The *Scoping Document* was distributed in March 2003 to local, state, and federal agencies; local libraries; and citizens/other groups with an interest in the proposed project. The *Scoping Document* also contained a *Draft Scoping Decision Document* and asked for comments on that decision during comment period, which also included the Interagency Scoping Hearing and the Public Scoping Hearing, both held on April 23, 2003. The *Scoping Decision Document* (SDD) was then updated and distributed in May 2003 along with the final *Corridor Management Plan* which discusses the need for the project in considerable detail. The May 2003 SDD

included a listing of the alternatives proposed for detailed analysis in the Draft EIS (DEIS).

For More Background Information, Visit the Project Website.

The 2003 *Scoping Document*, *Scoping Decision Document* (SDD), and *Corridor Management Plan*, as well as other information discussed in this *Amended SDD*, can be found at this address on the Mn/DOT Website:

<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/d7/projects/14newulmtonmankato/documents.html>.

A substantial amount of technical analysis and public involvement has occurred since completing the May 2003 SDD. This work has led to a greater understanding of the potential beneficial and adverse impacts of each alternative. As a result, Mn/DOT decided to issue this document (an Amended SDD), which updates the May 2003 SDD, and thus further refines the alternatives to be addressed in detail within the DEIS.

II. Project Description and Background

Mn/DOT proposes improvements for approximately 22.5 miles of US Highway 14 between Front Street, just west of the US 14 Minnesota River Bridge in New Ulm, to County Road (CR) 6 near North Mankato. As stated in the May 2003 SDD, the proposed project will upgrade the existing two-lane highway to a four-lane divided expressway with interchanges or at-grade stop-controlled intersections at crossroads where necessary, safe, and feasible. The proposed improved highway may use existing and/or new alignment that meets applicable standards for a rural expressway with a 70-mph engineering design speed and controlled access.

The project purpose and need, and the proposed action in general, are based on the projected travel needs presented in the *Corridor Management Plan* (CMP). The CMP was part of the planning process which identified, evaluated, and selected the project for detailed study based on a combination of factors that demonstrate the need for the proposed improvements and the need to plan for and preserve the necessary right-of-way. Specifically, the CMP documented



many problems along US 14, including a lack of passing zones, the need for future traffic signals, a large amount of truck traffic, a high number of crashes, and crashes that are more severe than similar highways within Minnesota. The May 2003 *SDD* now represents the first phase of scoping; and it recommended several corridor alternatives that were to be retained for analysis in the DEIS (see Exhibit 1).

During the summer of 2004, Mn/DOT began preparing the DEIS for improvements to US 14. By fall 2004, Mn/DOT was completing agency consultations and public involvement activities that concluded with additional alternatives screening recommendations (see also the October 2004 *Alternatives Screening Recommendations* document posted on the Project Website). This early effort on the DEIS involved a much more detailed environmental screening of the alternatives than previously completed and thus comprised a second scoping phase. During this timeframe, Mn/DOT also made the decision to include the Minnesota River Bridge in the project by extending the western project limit to Front Street in New Ulm. The primary reasons for this extension were to plan ahead for possible reconstruction actions (which will be needed eventually) and to eliminate the potential to create a bottleneck effect by expanding US 14 to four lanes, connecting to a two-lane bridge at the river.

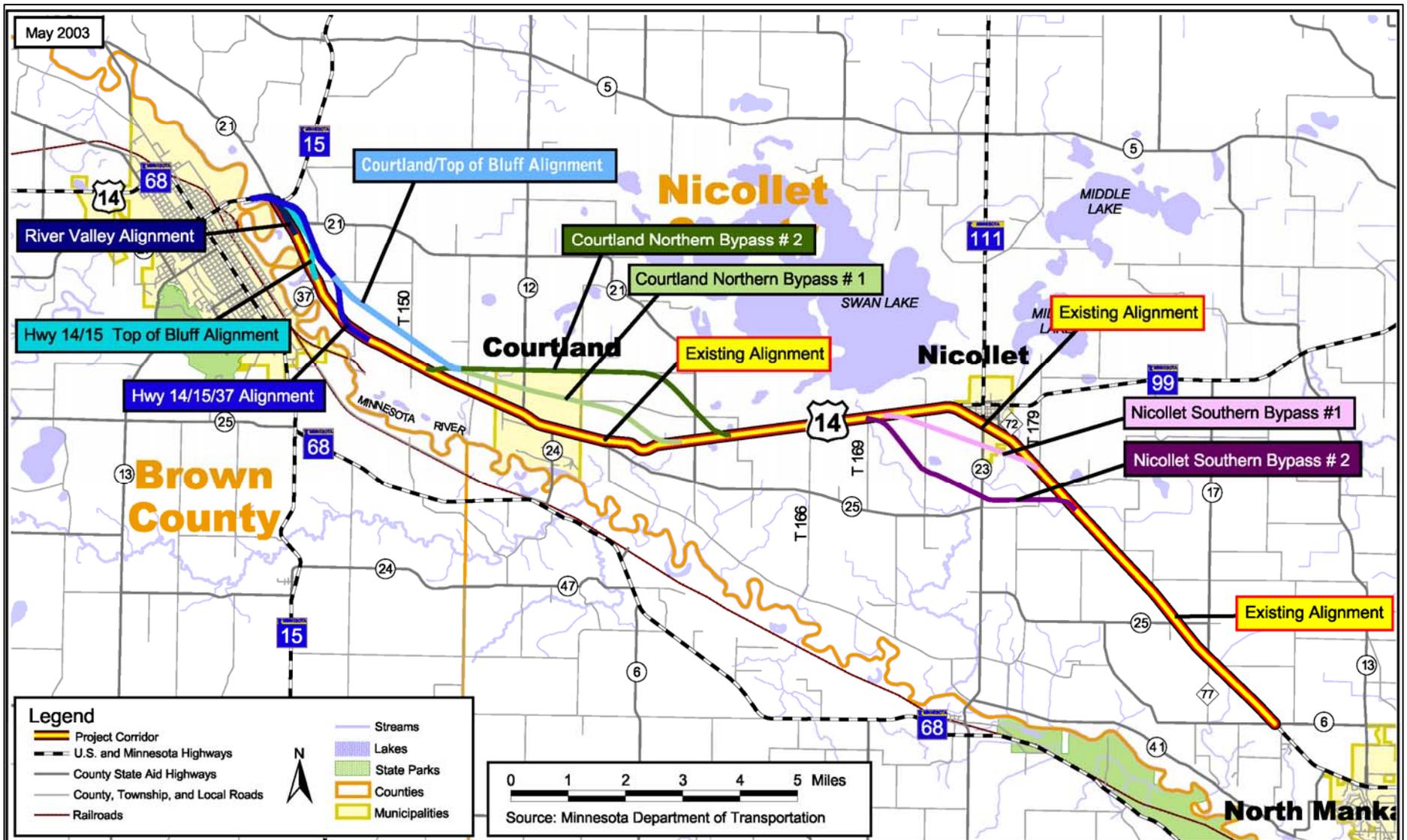
This *Amended SDD* provides the formal justification for eliminating alternatives from further consideration and adding in the Minnesota River crossing to the project limits. The *Amended SDD* will ensure more clarity and completeness in the decision-making process than possible with the wider range of alternatives considered at the beginning of the EIS process.

III. Purpose and Need

Mn/DOT's overall long-term objective is to provide safe and reliable transportation along US 14. The purpose of the proposed improvements to US 14 between New Ulm and North Mankato is to address increasing traffic volumes by creating a free-flow, high-capacity facility that will accommodate future mobility and public safety needs in a manner compatible with local communities and the area's resources. The proposed US 14 improvements would be designed to:

- Address and reduce the potential for serious traffic accidents
- Address poor access management and related safety problems
- Address transportation problems related to a high percentage of truck traffic, frequent changes in direction, speed, surface pavement conditions, and lane widths
- Improve system linkage to the regional highway network
- Respond to community and regional support for development of a 4-lane expressway
- Support ongoing and future economic development in the project area and within southern Minnesota by enhancing US 14's function as an important interregional trade corridor
- Provide reliable travel times for freight haulers
- Maintain community cohesiveness





Source: 14 West IRC Scoping Decision Document, Figure 2, May 2003

Exhibit 1



US 14 Amended Scoping Decision Document
New Ulm to North Mankato

Location Alternatives Retained for Further Review in US 14 Scoping Decision Document (May 2003)

IV. Project Schedule

Table 1 summarizes the anticipated schedule for environmental review of this project prior to letting for construction. A key component to this process is a 45-day comment period for the DEIS, during which input from the public and agencies will be solicited. Comments received during this time will be incorporated into the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS).

TABLE 1
Schedule for US 14 Environmental Review

Completion Date	Task
March 2003	<i>Scoping Document/Draft Scoping Decision Document</i> released for public comment, beginning the 30-day comment period
April 2003	Held Public Scoping Meeting
May 2003	Released <i>Scoping Decision Document</i>
June 2003	Issued Federal Notice of Intent for Draft EIS
May 2005	Held Section 404 Permit, Pre-application consultation meeting with the Army Corps of Engineers
Summer 2005	Issue State EIS Preparation Notice
Winter 2005/2006	Distribute Draft EIS for agency/public comment; start of Draft EIS comment period
Winter 2005/2006	Hold Public Hearing on Draft EIS
Spring 2006	Mn/DOT and FHWA to identify the preferred corridor location alternative
Fall 2006	Distribute Final EIS
Winter 2006/2007	FHWA to issue Record of Decision; Mn/DOT to issue State Adequacy Determination
2007-2008	Begin right-of-way preservation and/or acquisition process
2015 to 2023	Possible construction start

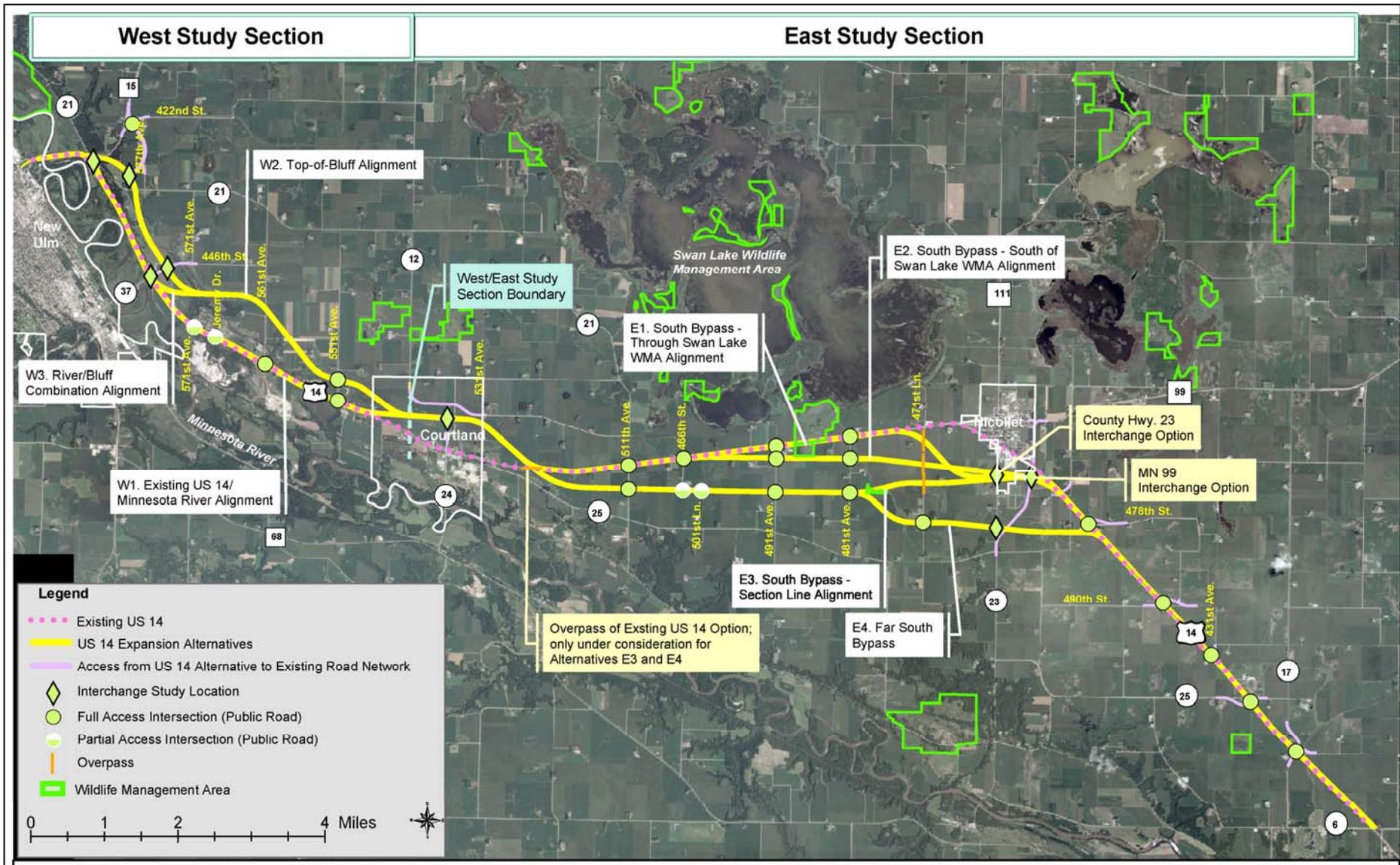
V. Alternatives

The alternatives still under consideration for the DEIS are shown in Exhibit 2. These alternatives include the No Build Alternative and several Build Alternatives. Improvements studied in detail consist of a variety of expanded four-lane alignment or highway location alternatives – including expansion of the existing roadway with bypasses of Courtland and Nicollet, several new alignment alternatives, and several interchange options. Alternatives that have been retained for detailed environmental analysis in this DEIS are discussed later in this document.

A. Original Scoping Process, Through Summer 2003

The original scoping process included consideration of a wide range of US 14 alignment and





roadway design alternatives. These were developed beginning in 2002 for analysis in the *Scoping Document* (see Figure 6-4 in the March 2003 *Scoping Document*, available on the US 14 Project Website). As discussed above in Section II, the May 2003 *SDD* included decisions to either eliminate or retain the alternatives (Exhibit 1). At that time, specific alternatives were recommended for additional study because they were identified as potentially feasible solutions to roadway deficiencies or because they warranted more detailed study to determine their feasibility. Alternatives that clearly did not address the identified deficiencies or that were found to be inconsistent with local land use plans and environmental resource goals were thus removed from further consideration—for example, the alternative of an improved two-lane highway was eliminated. The alternatives recommended for additional study during the scoping process included an expanded four-lane highway and a variety of alignment alternatives.

The alignment alternatives recommended for more detailed study in the original scoping process included expansion and reconstruction along the existing highway as well as new routings or bypasses along the west end of the corridor (near the Minnesota River) and around Courtland and Nicollet. The now-completed second phase of scoping (formalized by this *Amended SDD*) has largely evaluated the same corridor alternatives; however, the process of studying additional details has led to more precision in the corridor locations, some new corridors, and the elimination of others.

B. Additional Scoping Phase, Completed Late 2004

Screening of Alternative Alignments

Shortly after beginning work on the DEIS, the alternatives included for detailed study in the May 2003 *SDD* were once again reviewed. While this second phase of scoping built upon the recommendations made in the *SDD*, it was also conducted in a manner that left the project open to new data, new ideas, and decision-making aimed at developing a concise DEIS. Throughout the early EIS development process, Mn/DOT's goal has been to develop a DEIS that will present and compare only the most reasonable alternatives—specifically, alternatives that will adequately solve expected transportation problems while avoiding and minimizing the anticipated adverse impacts.

The bulk of the additional 2004 scoping effort is documented in the *Alternatives Screening Recommendations* and the *Interchange Workshop Report*, both of which are published on the Project Website (Exhibit 3).

The work effort related to screening included

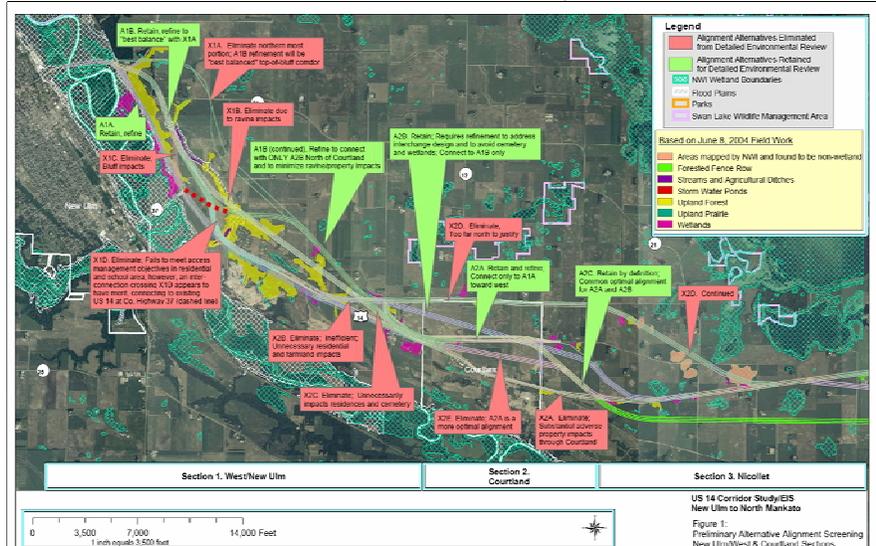


Exhibit 3. The map displayed here is part of the *Alternatives Screening Recommendations* document, found at the US 14 project Website: <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/d7/projects/14newulmtonmankato/documents.html>



considerable efforts to obtain public and agency input. Specifically, Mn/DOT conducted an Interchange Design Workshop (June 17, 2004); the first Project Advisory Committee (PAC) meeting (July 1, 2004); an Agency Environmental Workshop (July 21, 2004); and the second PAC meeting (September 23, 2004). During this period, Mn/DOT also held four informal public open house meetings (July 1, July 8, July 20, and July 21, 2004) and, later, a more formal open house to present the alternatives screening decisions (October 13, 2004).

This screening process yielded refined alternatives near the west end of the project, along US 14 at CR 37, north of Courtland, and south of Nicollet. These refinements have proven to be appropriate for more detailed environmental impact studies. For more discussion of the alternative alignments that were retained or eliminated, see Section V.C, below.

Minnesota River Bridge

After receiving comments from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the public during the summer of 2004, Mn/DOT made the decision to include the US 14 bridge over the Minnesota River within the DEIS project limits. This amendment to the Scoping Decision is appropriate because the US 14 DEIS will be evaluating highway improvements within a very long-term context, with little likelihood for any substantial construction until 2015 or later. Because the existing bridge was built in 1963, it will be more than 50 years old after 2013. The Minnesota River bridge is also moderately complex – it is 566 feet long with 6 spans, each about 94 feet long. The cast-in-place deck is supported by five 4.5-foot deep prestressed concrete girders. With this study ongoing today, now is an appropriate time to plan ahead for possible bridge repair or reconstruction actions (which will be needed eventually). The existing bridge also provides for only two lanes of traffic. Given the long-term and costly nature of river-spanning bridge projects, it is also possible that the existing bridge has the potential to create a bottleneck effect as traffic increases on the possible future four-lane highway.

Therefore, Mn/DOT will evaluate the proposed expansion of the bridge to four lanes in the DEIS, either with a new parallel bridge or through expansion of the existing bridge. Mn/DOT is not considering a new location for the Minnesota River bridge. This decision is based on the results of the vehicle origin-destination study completed for the *Corridor Management Plan* (see the US 14 Project Website for more information). This study revealed that approximately 85 percent of all the vehicles entering and exiting New Ulm on US 14 either started or stopped their trips in New Ulm. This finding suggested that a bypass of New Ulm, which would include a new river crossing, would probably not divert enough traffic from existing US 14 through the city to make construction of a New Ulm bypass economically feasible.

C. Amended Scoping Alternatives

This section provides the formal justification for amending, or changing, the May 2003 Scoping Decision. Table 2 provides a comparison of the alternatives retained for additional analysis in the May 2003 *SDD*, and those retained for additional analysis based on the additional scoping phase that took place at the beginning of the DEIS process. The left-hand column of the table lists the alternatives recommended for additional analysis in the *SDD*. The middle column indicates whether or not Mn/DOT decided to include an alternative in the DEIS during the second phase of scoping. The right-hand column indicates the name of the alternative for purposes of the DEIS.



TABLE 2 Summary of Scoping Alternatives Considered and Retained for Analysis in DEIS		
Alternatives Retained in May 2003 Scoping Decision Document	Retained Based on EIS Scoping and Amended Scoping Document	Description in Draft EIS
No Build Alternative	X	No Build Alternative
River Valley Alignment	X	W1. Existing US 14/Minnesota River Alignment
Courtland/Top of Bluff Alignment	X	W2. Top-of-Bluff Alignment and W3. River/Bluff Combination Alignment
Hwy. 14/15 Top of Bluff Alignment	X	
Hwy. 14/15/37 Alignment	X	
Existing US 14 through Courtland	Eliminated	
Courtland Northern Bypass #1	X	Common Courtland Bypass Alignment for alternatives to the east
Courtland Northern Bypass #2	Eliminated	
Existing US 14 through Nicollet	Eliminated	
Nicollet Southern Bypass #1	X	E1. South Bypass – Through Swan Lake WMA Alignment & E2. South Bypass – South of Swan Lake WMA Alignment
Nicollet Southern Bypass #2	X	E3. South Bypass Section Line Alignment & E4. Far South Bypass
Courtland Nicollet Bypass Connection	X	
Existing Alignment—east of Nicollet	X	Common eastern/existing alignment for all alternatives to the east
Existing Alignment—Minnesota River Crossing	X	Common western/existing alignment for all alternatives to west (extended to include the MN River bridge)

The subsections below provide additional information about each of the important decisions reflected in the Amended Scoping Decision. As appropriate the headings below include such keywords as “Eliminate,” “Add,” “Refine,” or “Consolidate” to clarify the change.

Add: Minnesota River Crossing

As previously discussed, the Amended Scoping Decision includes extending the west project limit across the Minnesota River, to include consideration of the bridge (see Section V.B, above).

Eliminate: Expand Existing US 14 through Courtland and Nicollet

The amended decision to eliminate these alternatives from further consideration was based on an analysis showing that expansion of the existing highway through these towns would result in substantial adverse community and property impacts. Additionally, these alternatives would fail to meet all project objectives and would not fully satisfy the project purpose and need. A



summary of this analysis follows below. More detailed information (including graphics of both communities) is posted on the Project Website—see the *Alternatives Screening Recommendations*.

In summary (for both communities), it would be impractical to completely eliminate US 14 access through Courtland and Nicollet, develop an interchange on the existing highway, or provide an improvement that would resolve conflicts sufficiently to prevent future installation of traffic signals. Additional specific justifications are included for each city below. A discussion of relative wetland impacts is also included in this document as Section D. The proposed roadway designs would provide for more through traffic on four through lanes with a two-way left turn lane in the center. However, speeds would still be reduced through the towns, most likely to the same posted speeds as today's or to lower speed limits. The current posted speed limits are 35 and 45 mph through Courtland and 50 mph through Nicollet (based on Mn/DOT Website data). Average speeds along US 14 would also be reduced further as traffic signals are added.

Both Courtland and Nicollet support bypasses of their communities. In July 2005, both communities passed resolutions endorsing the removal of the existing US 14 alignment from the list of alternatives studied in this DEIS (see Exhibits 4 and 5). Courtland has specifically expressed its preference is for a US 14 bypass (a north bypass route is identified in the City's Comprehensive Plan).

Analysis of Courtland. A preliminary environmental impact review showed that if US 14 were expanded to four lanes through Courtland, it would eliminate the buildings that comprise the heart of the community, requiring acquisition of most adjacent residences and businesses (see Table 3 below and Figure 5 in the *Alternatives Screening Recommendations* on the Project Website). Such a project could impact a local park located on the south side of US 14. However, it may be possible to avoid this potential Section 4(f) resource by expanding the highway only to the north, holding the southern edge of the existing US 14 pavement. The combination of these impacts may permanently weaken community cohesion in Courtland.¹ Even after construction, local access to US 14 would still be needed and crossing or turning traffic would continue to create delays and safety problems.

With major US 14 improvements in Courtland, access to remaining properties would be drastically altered. As noted in the project purpose and need, one objective in improving US 14 is to manage access to reduce safety deficiencies and to preserve mobility consistent with US 14's functional designation. Mn/DOT aims to limit the number of access points and is looking at interchange options along the entire corridor—including in Courtland. If an interchange providing access to the expanded US 14 were included in the improvements, the impacts to Courtland would increase substantially.

Given the small size of the City of Courtland and the proximity of the highway to any remaining homes and businesses, there would be limited opportunity to minimize adverse community impacts. The type of highway expansion needed to serve future traffic would simply eliminate a large part of the city and no special design features could change that basic outcome.

¹ Community cohesion refers to the social bonds that currently exist among community residents, as well as people from the surrounding areas who support the local businesses, use public resources, and participate in the social activities within the community.



Resolution 05-107

**Endorsing the Removal of the Existing Alignment
of Highway 14 from the list of Alternatives in the Draft EIS**

WHEREAS, the City of Courtland recognizes the regional significance of the Trunk Highway 14 west interregional corridor in supporting the regional economy;

WHEREAS, the last several years, the City has participated in developing the scoping study and the corridor management plan for this section of highway;

WHEREAS, the City has also participated in developing the draft of the environmental impact statement (EIS) for this highway and recognizes the necessity of the EIS for future planning and eventual construction;

WHEREAS, the City understands that the draft EIS now proposes to drop the existing alignment of Highway 14 from the list of alternatives;

WHEREAS, the proposal for a by-pass of the City is consistent with the City's Comprehensive Plan;

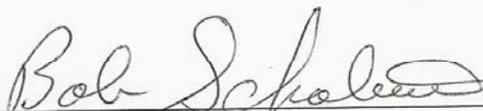
WHEREAS, because of the impact a four-lane on the existing alignment would have on the community, the City of Courtland agrees such an alternative needs no further study and should be dropped from consideration; and

WHEREAS, the City acknowledges its opportunity to continue to comment during completion of the draft EIS this fall;

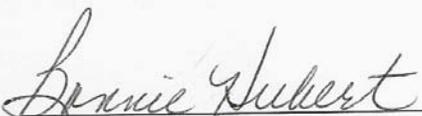
NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT HEREBY RESOLVED, the City of Courtland endorses the decision to drop from further review the existing alignment of Highway 14 through the City.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the City of Courtland supports continued progress on the draft EIS without further consideration of the existing alignment through the City.

Passed by the Courtland City Council this 4th day of August, 2005.



Bob Schabert, Mayor



Bonnie Hubert, City Clerk

Exhibit 4

City of Courtland Resolution

Resolution 7-27-05-C

**Endorsing the Removal of the Existing Alignment
of Highway 14 from the list of Alternatives in the Draft EIS**

WHEREAS, the City of Nicollet recognizes the regional significance of the Trunk Highway 14 west interregional corridor in supporting the regional economy;

WHEREAS, the last several years, the City has participated in developing the scoping study and the corridor management plan for this section of highway;

WHEREAS, the City has also participated in developing the draft of the environmental impact statement (EIS) for this highway and recognizes the necessity of the EIS for future planning and eventual construction;

WHEREAS, the City understands that the draft EIS now proposes to drop the existing alignment of Highway 14 from the list of alternatives;

WHEREAS, because of the impact a four-lane on the existing alignment would have on the community, the City of Nicollet agrees such an alternative needs no further study and should be dropped from consideration; and

WHEREAS, the City acknowledges its opportunity to continue to comment on the several bypass alternatives during completion of the draft EIS this fall;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT HEREBY RESOLVED, the City of Nicollet endorses the decision to drop from further review the existing alignment of Highway 14 through the City.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the City of Nicollet supports continued progress on the draft EIS without further consideration of the existing alignment through the City.

Passed by the Nicollet City Council this 27th day of July, 2005.



Mike Mans, Mayor



Claus Peukert, City Clerk

Based on the above, Mn/DOT is eliminating this alternative from additional environmental review. Substantially adverse community impacts would result from expanding US 14 to four lanes through Courtland; this decision is also supported by the City of Courtland.

TABLE 3 Potential Impacts – Four-lane Expansion of Existing US 14 Alignment Through Courtland	
Environmental Issue	Potential Impacts
Property Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Over 30 buildings within 130-foot Mn/DOT right-of-way - Approximately 60 buildings within 130-foot Mn/DOT right-of-way + 20-foot standard setback - Substantially greater property impacts would occur if an interchange were constructed along existing US 14 in Courtland
Parks and Open Space	None anticipated assuming expansion of the existing highway to the north
Historic Architectural Resources	None anticipated ¹
Archaeological Resources	None anticipated ¹
<small>1 BASED ON CULTURAL RESOURCE SURVEY FOR TH 14 WEST INTERREGIONAL CORRIDOR ALTERNATIVES STUDY (SP 5200-03) NICOLLET COUNTY, MN COMPLETED MAY 2004</small>	

Analysis of Nicollet. The expansion of US 14 through Nicollet is deleted from further detailed study, based on justifications similar to those stated for Courtland. Table 4 shows the anticipated impacts of expanding US 14 to a four-lane roadway through Nicollet (also see the *Alternatives Screening Recommendations*, Figure 6 on the Project Website). Assuming a 130-foot right-of-way, no buildings would be impacted by expanding US 14 to four lanes. Assuming a 130-foot cross section and the City’s standard residential 30-foot setback, approximately five buildings would be impacted by expanding US 14 to four-lanes through Nicollet. These buildings are located on the south side of US 14 and are either part of a business or a mobile home park. In addition to property impacts, access to businesses and residential areas located both north and south of the roadway would be impacted. Currently, the properties that would be acquired access US 14 directly from the highway.

A frontage road was also studied for Nicollet, however, this would create additional community impacts. Also, a frontage road might not be necessary because of the potential to provide supporting roadways and access improvements 1-3 blocks from existing US 14 (sometimes known as “backage roads”). Therefore, the community impact considerations discussed for Nicollet, are considered conservatively low.

Even with a through-town expansion in Nicollet, the need for a traffic signal would still arise and the presence of increasing traffic would continue to adversely impact the community. Forecasted traffic volumes at the intersection of US 14 and CR 23/MN 111 are expected to be high enough by 2030 to require a traffic signal based on standards set in the *Minnesota Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices*. Traffic signals can have a negative effect on mobility; therefore, IRC guidelines discourage signals on interregional corridors, including US 14.

Building an interchange to serve Nicollet along existing US 14 would avoid a traffic signal and



address mobility, however, it would also unreasonably increase the impacts on the City of Nicollet, including adverse impacts on community cohesion. Such an interchange would require taking numerous buildings from all four quadrants of US 14 and CR 23/MN 111.

In summary, Mn/DOT is eliminating the expansion of US 14 through Nicollet from further consideration because it is not an effective, or practical interregional mobility improvement given the risk for a traffic signal, and the impracticality of an interchange. Additionally, the City favors being bypassed by US 14 (see Exhibit 5). Studying a bypass with an interchange now will allow the city to appropriately plan for and guide future development.

Mn/DOT is seeking long-term solutions for this corridor which include taking steps to improve highway capacity and mobility and avoiding the need for traffic signals. Removing this alternative and only considering bypasses of Nicollet with interchanges will proactively resolve issues that would arise in Nicollet if the existing highway were expanded to four lanes with no interchange. This long-term solution will help avoid the need to acquire right-of-way to build an interchange after the highway has been expanded and right-of-way is at a premium.

TABLE 4	
Potential Impacts – Four-lane Expansion of Existing US 14 Alignment Through Nicollet	
Environmental Issue	Potential Impacts
Property Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No buildings located within the 130-foot right-of-way - approximately 5 buildings within 130-foot right-of-way and 30-foot standard setback - Substantially greater property impacts would occur if an interchange were constructed along existing US 14 in Nicollet
Parks and Open Space	None anticipated
Historic Architectural Resources	None anticipated ¹
Archaeological Resources	None anticipated ¹
1 BASED ON CULTURAL RESOURCE SURVEY FOR TH 14 WEST INTERREGIONAL CORRIDOR ALTERNATIVES STUDY (SP 5200-03) NICOLLET COUNTY, MN COMPLETED MAY 2004	

Refine/Consolidate: Connectors between Existing US 14 and Top-of-Bluff Alignments

As shown on Table 2 and Exhibit 1, two connectors between US 14 and the Courtland/Top of Bluff Alignment were recommended for additional analysis in the May 2003 *SDD* (the Hwy. 14/15 Top-of-Bluff Alignment; and the Highway 14/15/37 Alignment). Both of these connector alignments departed from existing westbound US 14 to go up the bluff to connect with the Courtland/Top of Bluff Alignment.

During the second phase of scoping, Mn/DOT determined that these routings up and down the bluff west of CR 37 failed to address purpose and need objectives and did not serve to avoid the access management challenges east of CR 37, which includes a residential area and the Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School. Overall, Mn/DOT has concluded that these connector alternatives were weak in terms of both satisfying purpose and need and avoiding undue environmental impacts, including combined impacts to the bluff area and the residential and



Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School area.

However, Mn/DOT has determined that a connection that extends up the bluff from existing eastbound US 14 at CR 37 to tie into the Top-of-Bluff alignment warrants consideration. This alternative will be studied in the DEIS as Alternative W3-River/Bluff Combination Alignment (see Exhibits 1 and 2 for comparison). This connection allows for more use of the existing highway than the Top-of-Bluff Alignment while also avoiding access management challenges near the residential area and High School.

Eliminate: Courtland Northern Bypass #2

Mn/DOT has deleted this alternative because it is unnecessary to study an alignment so far north of the existing alignment. The Courtland bypass alignment shown on Exhibit 2 – which is common for all alternatives to the east – was determined to provide the best balance for a northern bypass of Courtland. This route provides convenient access to Courtland and involves less right-of-way and wetland impacts than a bypass farther to the north. Eliminating the Courtland Northern Bypass #2 is also in line with the City of Courtland’s preference to have a bypass that allows room for growth, but that is not so far away from the town that it would inconvenience local businesses and commuters or deter through travelers from stopping in Courtland.

Refine: Nicollet Bypass Alignments

The May 2003 SDD’s Nicollet Southern Bypass #1 has been refined into two near south bypass alternatives, based on either following US 14 through the Swan Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA) or avoiding the WMA to the south (see Exhibits 1 and 2 for comparison). Alternative E1 bypasses Nicollet, and reconnects to existing US 14 just west of Nicollet. Alternative E2 also bypasses Nicollet, but it reconnects to existing US 14 farther west – west of the WMA.

The Nicollet Southern Bypass #2, as shown on Exhibit 1, has been refined into DEIS Alternative E4, a far south bypass of Nicollet. As shown on Exhibit 1, the May 2003 SDD’s Nicollet Southern Bypass #2 reconnected to US 14 at T 169 (481st Avenue on Exhibit 2). DEIS Alternative E4 is a far south bypass of Nicollet; however, rather than reconnecting to US 14 at 481st Avenue, it reconnects to US 14 just east of Courtland. Key reasons for retaining a far-south bypass are to evaluate the corridor with respect to the future growth of Nicollet and to avoid all impacts to the Swan Lake WMA. The proposed extension of Alternative E4 toward the west, along a section line, would also avoid a number of residential property impacts and allow for excellent access management along the improved highway. Alternative E3 also extends along the section line west of Nicollet, crossing the existing US 14 alignment near Courtland. Because of this, Alternative E3 blends the objectives of Alternatives E2 and E4, avoiding the WMA while providing for better access management than Alternative E2 (see Exhibit 2).

D. Comparison of Wetland Impacts for Retained DEIS Alternatives and Eliminated Through-Town Alternatives

Table 5 provides a comparison of the estimated total wetland impacts for the DEIS Build Alternatives as well as the estimated impacts for the eliminated through-town alternatives (see Exhibit 2). This comparison illustrates that the through-town alternatives would result in reduced wetland impacts versus the simplest bypasses of Courtland and Nicollet (Alternatives



W1 and E1). However, Table 5 also shows that other corridor alternatives proposed for detailed analysis in the DEIS avoid more wetland impacts than would be avoided by going through the towns.

TABLE 5		
Estimated Wetland Impacts – Proposed DEIS Build Alternatives and Eliminated Through-Town Alternatives		
Alternative	Est. Wetland Impacts (acres)	Remarks
WEST STUDY SECTION		
<i>Courtland Existing 14— Just West of Town (eliminated)</i>	16.9	<i>1.3 acres less impact than Alt. W1, but would result in major community impacts; would be 5 acres more impact than Alt. W2</i>
W1 —Existing US 14 with Courtland Bypass	18.1	Maximum use of existing highway for proposed DEIS Build Alternatives
W2 —Top-of-Bluff	5.0	Maximum use of new corridor; lowest wetland impact to west
W3 —Combination	20.2	Blend of Alternatives W1 and W2; highest wetland impact
EAST STUDY SECTION		
<i>Courtland & Nicollet Through-Town Improvements (eliminated)</i>	8.4	<i>3.6 to 4.1 acres less impact than Alt. E1, but would either result in a traffic signal or would otherwise heavily impact Nicollet; would be 3.6 acres more impact than Alt. E4.</i>
E1 —Near South Bypass	12.0 [11.5]	Maximum use of existing highway for proposed DEIS Build Alternatives; affects WMA lands
E2 —South of WMA Alignment	14.8 [13.6]	Moderate use of new corridor
E3 —Section Line Alignment	17.9 [14.0]	Considerable use of new corridor; highest wetland impacts to east
E4 —Far South Bypass	4.8	Maximum use of new corridor; lowest wetland impact to east
Through-Town Alts. (Entirely on existing alignment— total of eliminated alts.)	25.3	<i>It is 15.5 acres more impact than W2+E4 (9.8 acres; the least overall wetland impact).</i> <i>This is 12.8 to 8.9 acres less impact than the 38.1 to 34.2 acres impacted by W3+E3; the highest overall wetland impact.</i>
<u>Note:</u> Bracketed [#] figures show estimated impacts for the optional interchange at MN 99 instead of at Co. Hwy 23.		



Perhaps most noteworthy about the results in Table 5, is that they are contrary to the intuitive assumption that more new highway corridor will yield more wetland impacts. In fact, the results show that the combination of build alternatives using the *maximum* amount of new corridor (Alternatives W2 and E4) yield the lowest potential wetland impacts.

All of the alternatives under consideration in the DEIS are considered viable options despite the higher wetland impacts of some alternatives as shown in Table 5. For example, Alternative W2, which uses the most acres of new corridor, resulted in fewer acres of impacted wetland than Alternatives W1 and W3. This result is mainly due to the US 14/MN 15 interchange in Alternative W2 being located on top of the bluff where wetlands are not present. Under Alternatives W1 and W3, the interchange is located closer to the river resulting in greater wetland impacts. Despite having higher wetland impacts than Alternative W2, Alternatives W1 and W3 are still viable options given environmental trade-offs associated with Alternative W2. For example, the use of new corridor under Alternative W2 would require a steep highway grade to get to the top of the bluff; would result in adverse visual impacts along the bluff; and would increase impacts to farmland by 63 to 159 acres (28 to 122 percent) compared to Alternatives W3 and W1 respectively.²

The DEIS will include a full comparison of the alternatives, including the environmental tradeoffs associated with each one. The ultimate recommendation of a preferred alternative will be made by balancing the entire range of environmental impact categories.

VI. Public and Agency Involvement

As discussed above in Section V.B, the full range of corridor alignment alternatives and interchange concepts were presented to a wide audience—including the US 14 Corridor Study Project Advisory Committee (PAC), the general public (through a series of informal open houses in July 2004), and to agencies (through workshops emphasizing environmental agency input held on July 21, 2004). The input gathered from local communities and resource agencies during the preliminary screening process was used to develop and prioritize the criteria that Mn/DOT used to determine which corridor alignment alternatives and interchange concepts to analyze in detail in the DEIS. The revised set of alignment alternatives was presented to the public at a Public Meeting held on October 13, 2004. These alternatives are the most reasonable and feasible alternatives to carry forward in to the DEIS for analysis. Completion of this work and coordination allowed Mn/DOT to focus more closely on the most promising alignments and interchange design concepts. Mn/DOT will continue to coordinate with resource agencies, as well as community organizations, area property owners, business owners, residents, and local, county, regional, state, and federal agencies throughout the development of this project.

VII. Social, Economic, and Environmental Impact Assessment

The following social, economic, and environmental issues will require analysis in the DEIS:

- Air quality impacts
- Benefit-cost and analysis

² Estimated farmland impacts in the west study section are: Alternative W1 = 130 acres; Alternative W2 = 289 acres; and Alternative W3 = 226 acres.



- Bikeways and pedestrians
- Construction impacts
- Contaminated properties
- Cultural resources (historical and archaeological)
- Cumulative Impacts
- Economic impacts
- Environmental justice
- Erosion control and slope stability
- Excess materials
- Farmland impacts
- Fish and wildlife
- Floodplains
- Groundwater and geology
- Handicapped access
- Irreversible and Irretrievable Commitment of Resources
- Land use impacts
- Noise
- Park, recreational, open space, and Section 4(f)/6(f) public-use land
- Relationship of Local Short-term Uses versus Long-term Productivity
- Right-of-way and relocations
- Secondary Impacts
- Social, neighborhood, and community facility impacts
- Soils (prime and unique farmland, statewide important soils)
- Stream and water body modification
- Threatened and endangered species –state and federal
- Traffic impacts and forecasts
- Vegetation
- Visual impacts
- Water quality
- Wetlands

The scoping process identified several key issues for consideration in the DEIS, including:

Prime Farmland/Statewide Important Soils

Much of the soil in Nicollet County is designated as prime farmland by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). All of the Build Alternatives would result in the conversion of prime farmland to Mn/DOT right-of-way. This DEIS will include a quantitative analysis of the potential impacts to prime farmland soils and farming operations.

Erosion Control and Slope Stability

The Minnesota River Valley is one of the major natural features in the study area. The western end of corridor descends down the river bluff and follows the river to the US 14/MN 15 intersection. Improvement alternatives in the western end of the study area may impact the river bluff in the vicinity of US 14/MN 15. Additionally, there are several intermittent streams and drainage ways in the study area. These watercourses will be examined in this DEIS, including the impacts of watercourse modifications.



Wetlands and Water Quality

A substantial number of wetlands are located in the study area, including a high density of wetland resources north and northwest of Nicollet, many of which are associated with the Swan Lake WMA. Many of the wetlands and watercourses are also designated as Public Waters. The DEIS analysis will quantify the wetland and Public Waters impacts of each alternative.

Floodplains

The existing US 14 roadway is adjacent to the Minnesota River 100-year floodplain near the intersection of US 14/MN 15. US 14 is in the 100-year floodplain between this intersection and the river bridge. If this intersection were to be expanded it may result in a longitudinal encroachment into the floodplain. There are also floodplains within the study area that are associated with some intermittent streams and drainage ways that are tributaries to the Minnesota River. Some alternatives may potentially cross these floodplains which may result in a transverse encroachment.

Land Use and Community Planning

All of the Build Alternatives would have land use impacts within the cities of New Ulm, Courtland, and Nicollet. Also, agricultural land uses would be impacted. The DEIS will include analysis of the compatibility of each alternative with local and regional planning.

Cultural Resources-Historic and Archaeological

The study area includes several archaeological and historic sites. All known features and features that warrant additional study will be discussed in detail in a separate Cultural Resources Report that will accompany the DEIS. This report will be completed during fall 2005. Some alternatives may potentially come into contact with or come close to these resources, which may result in an impact.

Park, Recreational, Open Space, and Section 4(f)/6(f) Public-use Land

The Swan Lake WMA is located within the study area. Additionally several small local and regional parks are in the vicinity of US 14. Improvements would likely impact the Swan Lake WMA between Courtland and Nicollet. It does not appear that any of the new alignment Build Alternatives would impact other park properties.

Bikeways and Pedestrians

The DEIS will consider the safe accommodation of bicyclists and pedestrians in the vicinity of US 14. While interregional corridors such as US 14 are generally not an ideal conveyor of non-motorized traffic, the DEIS will at least contain an assessment of bicycle and pedestrian safety.

Special Report

In addition to consideration of these key issues, a special report, Environmental Site Assessment for contaminated properties, will also accompany the DEIS.

VIII. Permits and Approvals

It is anticipated that federal, state, and other local permits/approvals may be required for the proposed action. It is probable that the following permits and approvals will be required (an updated list of permits/approvals will be included in the DEIS):

- Section 404 Permit from the United States Army Corps of Engineers
- Section 401 Water Quality Certification from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency



(MPCA)

- National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) from MPCA
- Public Waters Permit from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (Mn/DNR)
- Wetland Conservation Act from Mn/DOT Office of Environmental Services
- Municipal consent from the cities of New Ulm, Courtland, and Nicollet

IX. Level of Action

This project is considered a federal Class I action because there is the potential for significant environmental effects as documented in the Social, Economic, and Environmental Impact Assessment section. This project meets the mandatory EIS threshold test at Minnesota Rule 4410.4400, subpart 16. Mn/DOT is the Responsible Governmental Unit (RGU) for this project.

